

ZHANG RUI 张瑞 ONE YEAR 一年

28 JUNE - 17 AUGUST 2013

'One Year' presents a new body of work by Chinese-born artist Zhang Rui based on a process of visual documentation developed over the last twelve months while living in Australia. During this time, Rui has collected a number of images sourced from the internet as the basis of her series of paintings. The images include photographs of family and friends from her home in China, as well as photojournalism reportage and blog posts from a number of Chinese activists. The result is a body of work that is as perplexing as it is diverse, combining familiar landscape scenery with stark portraiture and abstractions. These sparsely coloured works appear to be painted through a haze of distance, reflecting the nature of memory in forming an understanding of our surroundings. 'One Year' highlights the contradictions implicit in online media that is saturated with imagery yet scarcely allows the time for reflection.

What emerges in 'One Year' is Rui's desire to document a broad range of scenes and actions, creating a body of work that functions much like an archive and creates a number of highly personal and at times cryptic connections between works.

Previous works from Rui's practice has been incorporated in 'One Year', both as an introduction into the artist's practice and to illustrate a kind of Social Realism. 'Grass' (2011), painted when Rui was based in Germany, depicts the self-taught and blind Chinese lawyer Chen Guangcheng, whose hands cradle a small tuft of grass. With poetic simplicity, 'Grass' captures the symbolic status of Chen as a figure of individualism and political freedom amongst many Chinese. Chen campaigned against official family-planning practices that involved violence and forced abortion before being put under house arrest, only to escape shortly after to the American Embassy to seek refuge. This intimate portrait of Chen remembers the significant actions of Chen, considering how these may have repercussions in a global scale.

'Grass Mud Horse' (2013) shifts between a figurative landscape and a work of complex symbolic value. While not often seen in China, images of grass mud horses – or Alpacas – have become widely circulated on the internet. In phonetic Mandarin, the character for grass mud horse, 草泥马 (cǎonímǎ) sound almost identical to the familiar curse; 'fuck your mother' 肏你妈 (cào nǐ mā). This pun was originally coined by netizens (online citizens) as a means of circumventing Chinese government censorship of 'vulgar content'. The grass mud horse was one of the so-called '10 mythical creatures' created as part of a hoax article that was published on Chinese

website Baide Baike, which is similar to Wikipedia, in early 2009. It has since become a recognisable form of symbolic defiance of censorship in China. More recently on the anniversary of the event in Tiananmen Square, words including 'Tiananmen', 'Square', 'June', the numbers '4' and '6', and even 'today' and 'tonight' were temporarily blocked from searches online. This restriction of the perception and figuring of Chinese history surely has a devastating effect on how Chinese citizens reconcile their past. The disjuncture between language and cultural meaning remind us not only of the treachery of the images, but also the power of words.

Other works in 'One Year' such as 'Leave Her Alone' (2013) reinforce a subversive streak amongst Chinese citizens in figuring their individual and national identities online. The top figure in this painting is Ai Xiaoming, a Chinese filmmaker and scholar who took a photo of herself in this pose as a tribute to fellow activist Ye Heiyan, who in 2012 stood outside of a Chinese primary school to protest against the alleged abuse of school girls by teachers and Chinese officials. Rui's use of English language both echoes Ai and Ye's calls of solidarity, transforming an online protest into a tangible 'real world' experience, or what mid-twentieth century French philosopher Gaston Bachelard has described as acts of creative disobedience.

Interestingly, the overtly political works are interweaved by a number of landscapes and portraits that produce a dense narrative throughout the exhibition, connecting often disparate experience from Sydney and abroad. 'Rainbow' (2012) and 'Smoke' (2013) were inspired by two parallel events that occurred on the same day, Saturday 30 June 2013 in Australia and China. Scrolling through Instagram Rui noticed a handful of posts of a rainbow that had appeared over Sydney Harbour. Through her newsfeed she saw a second rainbow, this one formed from a fine mist emerging from a fire hose. Emergency services had been called to a shopping centre in the artist's hometown of Tianjin to extinguish a catastrophic fire. While official news provided only a short summary of the activity and twelve dead, social media sites such as Instagram, Weibo and Twitter showed posts of hundreds of lives lost, severe damage and only a small number of personnel to fight the fire. 'Smoke', signifies an abstracted rendering of the Tianjin fire, its form almost incomprehensible through the thick fog that impedes the actual event.

'One Year' is not only a meditation on the artists time spent living in Australia, but a conceptual engagement with the relative freedom and critical perspective that this distance from her home offers. Although there is a sense of unease or anxiety that is conveyed through a number of these idiosyncratic paintings, one gains a sense that is the ability to actualise these moments of trauma for Rui, whether they be national events or personal encounters, that has defined her time in Australia.

Zhang Rui would like to thank Aaron Seeto for the opportunity to present this exhibition, Toby Chapman for his support, Lorraine Chung for her translations, Ji Ruan for his support and translation, and her family in China.

Toby Chapman
Assistant Curator, 4A

ZHANG RUI

LIST OF WORKS

CLOCKWISE FROM ENTRANCE TO GALLERY

Grass (草泥马), (2011)

oil on canvas
20 x 20 cm

Wild Rabbits (野兔), (2013)

oil on canvas
45 x 45 cm

We Are Sorry (抱歉), (2013)

oil on canvas
41 x 51 cm

Leave Her Alone (放开她), (2013)

oil on canvas
76 x 51 cm

A Little Bird (小鸟), (2011)

oil on canvas
20 x 20 cm

Grass Mud Horses (草泥马), (2013)

oil on canvas
61 x 76 cm

Hands Touching Keyboard

(键盘上的双手), (2013)

oil on canvas
20 x 25 cm

Two Birds (两只鸟), (2013)

oil on canvas
25 x 31 cm

Hiking through the National Park

(远足), (2013)

oil on canvas
31 x 41 cm

Ducks (鸭子), (2013)

oil on canvas
30 x 40 cm

Flowers (花), (2013)

oil on canvas
25 x 31 cm

Two Chinese Women (两个中国女人),
(2013)

oil on canvas
28 x 36 cm

Smoke (烟尘), (2013)

oil on canvas
30 x 40 cm

Lily Pads (荷叶), (2012)

oil on canvas
20 x 30 cm

Chinese Garden of Friendship (谊园),
(2012)

oil on canvas
30 x 30 cm

Rainbow (彩虹), (2012)

oil on canvas
40 x 50 cm

All works courtesy of the artist.

ZHANG RUI

LIST OF WORKS

CLOCKWISE IN ENCLOSED ROOM

Friendly Neighbours (友邦), (2013)

oil on canvas

30 x 40 cm

Chinatown #1 (中国城), (2012)

oil on canvas

40 x 50 cm

Chinatown #2 (中国城), (2012)

oil on canvas

40 x 50 cm

Six Brothers (六兄弟), (2012)

oil on canvas

40 x 50 cm

Militias (红枪队), (2012)

oil on canvas

40 X 50 cm

Soong Ching-ling (宋庆龄), (2012)

oil on canvas

40 X 50 cm

Australian Crane (鹤), (2013)

oil on canvas

38.5 x 90 cm

My Mother (我的妈妈), (2013)

oil on canvas

30 x 30 cm

Newborn #1 (新生儿), (2013)

oil on canvas

30 x 40 cm

Newborn #2 (新生儿), (2013)

oil on canvas

30 x 40 cm

Self portrait (自画像), (2013)

oil on canvas

30 x 30 cm

Smiley Face (笑脸), (2013)

oil on canvas

46 x 46 cm

JiRuan.net (吉软糖), (2013)

oil on canvas

30 x 30 cm

All works courtesy of the artist



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